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ABSTRACT

On September 26, 1962, Yemeni conspirators seized Imam Muhammad al-Badr's palace, declaring the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic. However, loyalist Zaydi tribes quickly mobilized against the new Republic, prompting its leaders to seek aid from Egyptian President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir. This marked the beginning of Egypt's most extensive and costly military venture, often compared to the U.S. engagement in Vietnam. For decades, historians have puzzled over why Yemen, a relatively marginal country, consumed so many Egyptian resources. Books published by former Egyptian intelligence heads and senior officials provide insight, revealing Yemen as an intelligence 'black hole' for Egypt. The intelligence gaps significantly influenced Egypt's decision to intervene and shaped its conduct in the Yemeni civil war. This article analyzes the Egyptian intervention in Yemen, using accounts from Egyptian intelligence and officials of that era, as well as U.S. and British archival materials.

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'Yemen was a miscalculation. We never thought it would lead to what it did'.[1]

Similar to numerous Middle Eastern monarchies, the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen confronted multiple coup attempts during the 1940s and 1950s. Notably, these upheavals took place in 1948—resulting in the assassination of Imam Yahya and his replacement by his son, Imam Ahmad—and again in 1955. But unlike the sweeping coups that characterized that era in other Middle Eastern nations—such as the 1952 Egyptian revolution or the 1958 Iraqi coup d'état—the instigators behind Yemeni coup attempts had more circumscribed objectives. Their aims did not encompass the wholesale dismantling of Yemen's political fabric; rather, their intent was to recalibrate the distribution of political power among the beneficiaries. Consequently, until 1962, the majority of challenges to the Imam's authority originated within the Zaydi[2] pro-imamate framework.[3]

However, the 1962 coup inaugurated a new chapter in Yemen's history. On 26 September 1962, a military faction, bolstered by exiled anti-Imamate Yemenis in Aden, orchestrated a coup d'état against Imam Muhammad al-Badr. This occurred merely a week after he had ascended to the throne following his father Imam Ahmad's death. Around 11:00 PM, a convoy of tanks and armoured vehicles converged upon al-Badr's palace. Concurrently, Colonel Abdullah al-Salal, the ringleader of the coup and the army's Chief of Staff and Royal Guard Commander, was engaged in a prearranged meeting with the Imam. Exiting the meeting, al-Salal instructed his co-conspirators to bombard the compound, operating under the belief that such heavy artillery would eliminate the Imam. Simultaneously, another group of soldiers took control of the capital's radio station and airfield. The insurgents (henceforth—the Republicans), subsequently broadcasted the demise of Imam al-Badr, the dissolution of the Imamate, and the establishment of a new entity—the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The presidency of this revolutionary Republic was conferred upon al-Salal.[4]

Despite initial reports of al-Badr's death, rumours about his true fate started to circulate in early October. On October 17, the deposed Imam addressed the Yemeni populace, confirming his survival and expressing his determination to lead counterinsurgency efforts. A mere 10 days later, he reappeared, galvanizing a call for jihad against the Republicans.[5]

While the coup was executed by dissident military officers, it enjoyed support from other quarters of the Yemeni urban populace: young intellectuals, Shafi'i merchants, and industrial labourers. However, upon receiving the news about the Imam's survival, this coalition began to unravel. Fearing the Republicans' inability to withstand the Imam's supporters (henceforth—the Royalists) single-handedly, al-Salal officially reached out to the Egyptian President, Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir, on October 3. He urgently requested direct Egyptian military intervention in the

[1]'Nasser admits he was wrong', The Times (London), March 5, 1968, 9.
[2]A faction of Shia Islam.
[3]Dana Adams Schmidt, *Yemen: the Unknown War*. (Toronto: The Bodley Head, 1968), 37–40.
[4]David M. Witty 'A Regular Army in Counterinsurgency Operations: Egypt in North Yemen, 1962– 1967', *The Journal of Military History*, 65, no. 2 (2001): 405; Edgar O'balance, *The War in Yemen* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1971), 67–68; Salah al-Din al-Hadidi, *Eye Witness to the Yemen War* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1984), 32 (Arabic).
[5]Adams Schmidt, *Yemen: the Unknown War (1968), 48.*

conflict to safeguard the survival of the fledgling Republic, and the Egyptian president responded.[6]

However, Egypt's initial deployment of ground troops to Yemen was limited—a single infantry company comprised of around 100 officers and soldiers. In fact, as recounted by Salah al-Din al-Hadidi, Egypt's chief of military intelligence and first commander of operations in Yemen, the initial decision was predicated on a brief mission duration, with the assumption that this constrained engagement would help stabilize the Yemeni Republicans' hold on power.[7] In early October, Nasir's mouthpiece, *al-Ahram* editor Muhammad Haykal, told US Ambassador Badeau that the 'Present involvement is principally of technicians and some material but no major troops supplied'.[8] Egyptian General Muhammad Fawzi contended that the intervention in Yemen had initially been formulated as 'a constrained initiative involving political, moral, and material support—by no means did it envision a course that would deplete our resources'.[9]

Notwithstanding these assertions, just a few weeks after the initial dispatch, several thousand Egyptian troops were already stationed in Yemen.[10] This was only the beginning of Egypt's military involvement in Yemen. Over time, the number of Egyptian soldiers in the country continued to increase, eventually peaking at around 70,000, which constituted about a third of the entire Egyptian army. This deployment became the prolonged military campaign in modern Egyptian history. As Nasir put it: 'I sent a company to Yemen and had to reinforce it with 70,000 soldiers'.[11]

Egypt's Yemen policy

From the outset, scholars have debated the reasons behind Nasir's decision to escalate Egypt's limited intervention in Yemen into its largest military deployment since he came to power. One predominant explanation is grounded in the Rational Actor Model, which views the state as a unitary actor making decisions based on a calculated assessment of costs and benefits.[12] This model can shed light on Nasir's strategic rationale for intervening in Yemen—namely, to counter perceived threats to Egypt's leadership in the Arab world and to maintain his influence over regional politics.

Nasir's ambition to enhance his standing within the Arab world was a central pillar of his rule. Since taking power in 1954, and particularly after the Suez Crisis of 1956, Nasir aimed to position himself as the leader of the Arab world. His pan-Arab ambitions drove him to adopt a radical policy of unifying Arab states under his leadership while seeking to dismantle what he saw as Western-backed 'reactionary regimes', including the Saudi royal family, the Hashemite kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq, and the Mutawakkilite kingdom of Yemen. Nasir pan-Arab endeavour reached its peak in February 1958 when Syria, amidst

[6]Robert W. Stookey, *Yemen: The Politics of the Yemen Arab Republic* (Colorado: West View Press, 1978), 225–226.
[7]*Hadidi, Eye Witness. . .*, 22.
[8]Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, Department of State, Central Files, 786 h.00/10–1062. October 10, 1962 https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d77
[9]Galal Nassar, The June challenge, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, June 7, 2007. https://www.masress.com/en/ahramweekly/10218
[10]Wagih Abu Dhikri, *The Flowers are Buried in Yemen (al-Zuhur tudfanu fi al-Yaman)* (Cairo: Dar al-Watan al-'Arabi, 1977), *10 (Arabic). Hadidi, Eye Witness. . ., 38.*
[11]Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 30.
[12]Bruce Bueno de Mesquita *The War Trap*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

internal turmoil and external threats, sought union with Egypt, resulting in the formation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) with Nasir at its helm and Cairo as its capital.[13]

However, the late 1950s marked a turning point in Nasir's foreign policy. Despite earlier successes, subsequent years saw setbacks, such as the refusal of the revolutionary regime in Iraq (which ousted the royal family on 14 July 1958) to align with Egypt. Moreover, the UAR faced persistent internal instability, culminating in Syria's secession from the union in September 1961. The emergence of a collaborative effort among 'reactionary' states, evident in the Arab League summit in Chtaura, Lebanon, in August 1962, further isolated Egypt within the Arab world.[14]

Hence, many argued that the Yemeni civil war, particularly the Republicans' plea for assistance, presented Nasir with an opportunity to reassert his regional standing. For instance, Kerr noted that for Nasir, responding to the Yemeni Republicans' call for help presented an opportunity to break Egypt's post-UAR political isolation.[15] Stephens also attributed the intervention to the dissolution of the UAR and Egypt's conflicts with Arab monarchies.[16] Dawisha framed the intervention as a defensive measure, arguing that Egypt viewed the defence of Yemeni republicans as essential for safeguarding Cairo from its regional rivals.[17] Barnett even claimed that the intervention had 'little to do with military politics and everything to do with symbolic politics', as it played a crucial role in maintaining Nasir's image as the leader of the Arab nationalist movement.[18]

Another key factor that drove Nasir to deepen his involvement in Yemen was his relationship with the Soviet Union. While Nasir's anti-Western stance was central to his regime's identity, he was also aware of the potential risks it posed to Egypt. As a result, he constantly sought financial, political and military support from the Soviet Union.

Two pivotal events solidified Egypt's alignment with the Soviets. The first was the 1955 Czech-Egyptian arms deal. After the Bandung Conference, Nasir received a message from the Soviet ambassador in Cairo expressing Moscow's willingness to provide arms to Egypt. This led to a substantial deal through which advanced Soviet weaponry was supplied to Egypt via Czechoslovakia, a Soviet satellite at the time.[19] The second key event was Soviet financial support in 1958 for the construction of the Aswan High Dam, following the withdrawal of offers from the US, UK, and World Bank.[20]

[13] James P. Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic, Boulder*,(Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 102–104.

[14] Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 216; Nasr, Salah, *Mudhakkirat Salah Nasr (memoirs of Salah Nasr)*, vol. 2, (Cairo, 1986), 243.

[15] Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War 1958–1967: a Study in Ideology in Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), second edition, 107.

[16] Robert Stephens *Nasser: A Political Biography*. (London. The Penguin Press, 1971), 378–410. For more biographies that focus as the role of Nasir the individual in the intervention in Yemen, see Anthony Nutting *Nasser* (New York, E.P Dutton and Co. 1972).

[17] Adeed Dawisha *Egypt in the Arab World: The Elements of Foreign Policy*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), 39–40; Adeed Dawisha 'Perceptions, Decisions and Consequences in Foreign Policy: The Egyptian Intervention in the Yemen', *Political Studies*, 25, no. 2, (1977): 216. For another 1970s study that framed the Yemeni conflict as a Saudi-Egyptian conflict, see Chapter 9 in Hussein Hassouna, *The League of Arab States and Regional Disputes: A Study of Middle East Conflicts* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana, 1975).

[18] Michael N. Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 139. For more studies from that period about the connection between Nasserism, Arab nationalism and the Egyptian foreign policy, see Youssef Choueiri, *Arab Nationalism: A History: Nation and State in the Arab World* (Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

[19] BBC, SWB, July 28, 1956, Daily series no. 5, Appendix A: Egypt, p. 9.

[20] Circular Telegram From the Department of State to Certain Diplomatic Missions, Department of State, Central Files, 886B.2614/10–2558. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d223

By the late 1950s, however, tensions had emerged between Egypt and the USSR due to Nasir's treatment of Communists and his rivalry with Iraq's Qasim. Nasir viewed the Yemen conflict as an opportunity to heal this rift. The Soviets strongly backed the Yemeni Republicans, recognizing the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in late 1962 and thus becoming the first non-Arab state to do so. They provided military aid to the Republicans, including aircraft to transport Egyptian troops, and by 1963, approximately 1,000 Soviet advisers were stationed in Yemen. Soviet support, driven by strategic interests such as access to the Hudaydah port, cemented Egypt's military role there. As Nasir's regional influence waned and Egypt's economy faltered, Soviet aid—including debt forgiveness and continued military assistance—became vital. To maintain Soviet support and preserve Egypt's regional standing, Nasir found it necessary to remain involved in Yemen.[21]

Another driver behind Egypt's intervention in Yemen can be explained through the Bureaucratic Politics Model, which highlights how foreign policy decisions emerge from the competing interests and priorities of various government players.[22] Applying this model to Nasir's decision reveals how different factions within the Egyptian military, intelligence agencies, and political leadership likely influenced the escalation of Egypt's involvement in Yemen.

The military's firm commitment to pan-Arabism was a major influence on Nasir's adoption of this ideology as the regime's core identity. Prominent figures, including Commander-in-Chief 'Abd al-Hakim 'Amir and his allies, strongly supported Nasir's pan-Arab agenda, while others, such as Zakaria Mohieddin (Egypt's Vice President, 1961–1968 and Prime Minister, 1965–1966) and 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (Egypt's Vice President, 1958–1964) advocated for a more conservative, Egypt-focused approach.[23]

This division was evident during the Yemeni crisis. The military establishment, led by 'Amir, pushed for deeper involvement in the conflict from the outset. For them, Yemen represented an opportunity to erase the humiliation of the UAR dissolution (the 'infisal' of 1961). Success in Yemen was seen as a way to restore the army's reputation and strengthen the military's influence at the expense of the civilian leadership. To achieve these goals, 'Amir and his faction advocated for reinforcing Egyptian forces in Yemen to counter the growing threat posed by Imam al-Badr's advancing forces.[24]

The intelligence failures

The Yemeni intervention ultimately hastened the decline of Nasirism in the Arab world. What began as a symbolic gesture of support for the Republicans turned into a costly quagmire, depleting Egypt's resources, overextending its military, and damaging its reputation. The massive deployment in Yemen led to a steep rise in the cost of the war, with estimates of the annual cost of this intervention ranging from $ 70 million to $ 150 million. This expenditure was equal to about 2% of Egyptian GDP and constituted

[21] P. J. Vatikiotis, 'The Soviet Union and Egypt: The Nasser Years,' in *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: The Post-World War II Era*, eds. Ivo J. Lederer and Wayne S. Vucinich (Stanford: Hoover Institute Press, 1974), 131; Sir Kennedy Trevaskis to Tony Greenwood, telegram no. 763, November 17, 1964. CO 1035/283, PRO.

[22] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2nd ed., (New York: Longman, 1999).

[23] *Nasser's Gamble. . .*, 62.

[24] Adeed Dawisha (1975) 'Intervention in the Yemen: An Analysis of Egyptian Perceptions and Policies'. *Middle East Journal*, 29(1): 50; Salah al-Din al-Hadidi (1984) *Eye Witness to the Yemen War*. Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli. (Arabic).

about 20% of Egypt's entire defence budget. Furthermore, starting in 1963, irregularities in Egypt's import arrangements surfaced, resulting in a severe scarcity of essential consumer goods such as flour, wheat, rice, corn, meat, and dairy products in the subsequent years. By the last six months of that year, Egypt's foreign debt had reached approximately $220 million. The ongoing drain on Egypt's military resources in Yemen also compelled the transportation of medical supplies to the battlefield, which depleted the domestic drug supply and triggered a rampant drug speculation phenomenon. These mounting economic and logistical challenges added to the strain on Egypt's resources and further complicated the Yemeni intervention.[25]

In addition, despite the deployment of about a third of Egypt's military force, the largest army in the Arab world, to Yemen, the Egyptian campaign in Yemen was ineffective. Egypt did manage to contain the Royalists' counter-campaign during the first year of their intervention but failed to gain a substantial foothold within the Royalists' strongholds. After a year of fighting, both sides entered a military impasse, during which there were no significant changes on the ground. This Yemeni campaign also prompted Saudi Arabia and Great Britain, whose involvement in the conflict had been hitherto limited, to deepen their engagement in the Yemeni civil war. The prolonged and unsuccessful nature of the conflict in Yemen exposed the limitations of Nasir's regional ambitions, revealing a stark contrast between his rhetoric and the reality on the ground. As aptly summarized by Robert Komer, a member of the US Security Council, at that time:

'Nasser is trapped in Yemen. It's bleeding him, but he can't afford either the sharp loss of face in letting go or (we hope) the risk of confronting us by starting on the Saudis again … On top of this, Nasser has deep economic trouble at home, and now an open fight with the Ba'th'.[26]

As highlighted earlier, Nasir eventually acknowledged that the intervention in Yemen was a grave error, stemming from significant misinformation. This suggests that Egyptian involvement in Yemen, from beginning to end, was characterized by multiple intelligence failures on three levels: tactical, strategic, and geopolitical. Each intelligence gap, in turn, influenced the Egyptian decision to intervene in the conflict, as well as the subsequent mismanagement of the intervention, leading to disastrous consequences for Cairo. Therefore, to understand the reasons behind the Egyptian debacle in Yemen, it is essential to examine these intelligence shortcomings.

Egypt's intervention in Yemen offers a valuable lens through which to examine how intelligence gaps in an authoritarian regime can lead to failed military ventures with enduring repercussions. This case is particularly illuminating due to the availability of memoirs from various levels of the Nasir administration, including senior intelligence officials. These memoirs provide scholars with unique insights into the decision-making apparatus of the most prominent Arab state of that era.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Egypt underwent its 'de-Nasirization' process, which, among other things, led to a greater willingness among Egyptian officials to openly discuss their time within the Nasir regime in memoirs and interviews. These newfound sources shed valuable light on the events and dynamics of

[25]Yael Vered (1967) *Revolution and War in Yemen*. Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 116, 229 (Hebrew); Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble* . . . , 198; Attachment to J.I.C/726/63, OCI. No. 3009/63, October 8, 1963, CO 1035/292, PRO.

[26]Paper by Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Yemen, 09/63, September 20, 1963. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d329

the Egyptian intervention, especially from the intelligence point of view. The two most important memoirs are those of Salah Nasr, head of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate from 1957 to 1967,[27] and Salah al-Din al-Hadidi, who, as aforementioned, served as Egypt's chief of military intelligence and the first commander of operations in Yemen.[28] Other significant military figures who wrote about that period include Ali Sabri, Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (1956–1957) and Prime Minister (1962–1965)[29]; and Amin Huwaydi, Director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (1967–1970) and Minister of War (1967–1968).[30]

Another important glimpse into the intelligence failures that led to Egypt's mismanagement of the Yemeni crisis can be found in the memoirs of senior officials within the Egyptian civil leadership, such as Muhammad Haykal[31]; 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi[32]; Anwar Sadat, the Speaker of the National Assembly (1960–1969)[33]; and Sami Sharaf, who served as Nasir's Minister of State for Presidential Affairs (1961–1971). [34]

This article will examine the intelligence failures that led to Egypt's debacle in Yemen, primarily through the lens of the aforementioned Egyptian literature. Additionally, it will draw on archival materials from the United States, which are essential for scholars of Nasir's Egypt due to the privileged position held by Washington (from the Egyptian perspective) during the period under examination. Furthermore, British documents also provide unique insights due to Britain's extensive involvement in Arab affairs, particularly from their vantage point in Aden.

As previously mentioned, the analysis will focus on three levels of intelligence failures: tactical, strategic, and geopolitical. Nye outlined two distinct categories of intelligence gaps: secrets and mysteries. He defined a secret as a specific piece of information attainable through espionage or technical surveillance. Conversely, a mystery represents an enigmatic question lacking a definitive answer. Such information cannot be obtained through theft, as even those directly involved may be unaware, and the circumstances might evolve unpredictably.[35] Analysis of Egyptian officials' accounts suggests that most of Cairo's intelligence shortcomings regarding their Yemen involvement pertained to secrets. The Egyptian leadership exhibited a significant deficiency in basic understanding of Yemen, most notably in the strategic level, a gap that more robust intelligence gathering could have filled. Conversely, at the geopolitical level, the Egyptians erred both in analysing the regional landscape and in assessing the reactions of their adversaries.

[27]Salah Nasr, *Memoirs of Salah Nasr (Mudhakkirat Salah Nasr)*. (Cairo, Dar al-Khayyal (Arabic), 1986).
[28]Hadidi, *Eye Witness*. . .
[29]Imam, 'Abd Allah (1988) 'Ali Sabri Remembers ('Ali Sabri yatadhakkar). Beirut: Dar al-WaHdah.
[30]Amin Huwaydi, *50 Years of Storms: Telling What I Saw (Khamsun 'aman min al-'awasif: Ma ra'aytuhu qultuh)* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ahram li-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr, 2002), 102 (Arabic).
[31]Fouad Matar, *Frankly Speaking about 'Abd al-Nasir: Dialogue with Muhammad Hassanein Haykal (bsiraha'a an 'Abd al-Nasir: kihwar ma'a Muhammad Hassanein Haykal)* (Jerusalem: Abu Arafa Press Agency, 1975).
[32]'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, *Memoirs of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi (Mudhakkirat 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi*), *vol 2* (Cairo: Al-Maktab al-Hadith (Arabic), 1977).
[33]Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
[34]Sami Sharaf and Abdullah Imam, '*Abd al-Nasir: This is how he Ruled Egypt* ('Abd al-Nasir: hakad'a kan yahkum misr) (Madbouly Al-Saghir Bookshop (Arabic), 1996); Sami Sharaf (2005–6) Years and Days with Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir: Sami Sharaf's Testimony (sanawat wa-ayyam ma' Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir: shahadat Sami Sharaf), 2th vol. Cairo: Dar al-Fursan li-l-Nashr (Arabic).].
[35]Joseph S. Nye Jr. Peering into the Future, *Foreign Affairs*, 73, no. 4, (1994): 88.

Tactical failure

Egypt's decision to intervene in the Yemen civil war was rooted in a critical tactical intelligence shortfall. As highlighted by various Egyptian officials, President Nasir's support for the Republicans rested on the mistaken assumption that al-Badr, the Yemeni Imam, had perished in the bombing of his palace on the first day of the revolution. Salah Nasr underscored the significance of this misinformation, highlighting its instrumental role in persuading Nasir to engage militarily in Yemen.[36] This influenced the restrained scope of the initial Egyptian intervention—Haykal posited that Nasir believed that given the circumstances prevailing on the ground (i.e. the imam's demise), a symbolic display of power would be adequate to secure the coup and thwart counter-revolution,[37] an argument also appears at Sharaf's memoirs.[38]

Hence, Nasir's initial decision to intervene in Yemen was based largely on the assumption that, given the lack of a unified leadership among the Royalists, their advancement could be countered by a limited deployment. However, the revelation of the Imam's survival proved to be a turning point in the conflict. This definitive disclosure injected renewed vigour into the Royalist forces, infusing them with a sense of purpose and determination. Consequently, they embarked on a campaign to gradually reconquer lost territory, effectively reversing the tide of the conflict.[39] These triumphs, in turn, prompted several tribes to abandon their allegiance to the Republicans and instead pledge their loyalty to the Imam.[40]

Upon acknowledging the tactical intelligence error, Nasir sought to rectify it by strengthening the combat forces in Yemen. Consequently, what began as a limited intervention in early October 1962 escalated to a deployment of 5,000 troops by month's end, fuelled by the belief that this force could sufficiently shift the balance of power. However, subsequent events exposed several significant strategic intelligence failures, highlighting the inadequacy of this approach.

Strategic failure

Over the years, various scholars pointed to historical animosities between Nasir and the two successive Imams, father and son, coupled with Egypt's role in plotting the Yemeni coup, as driving Nasir's shift towards a large-scale ground intervention in Yemen as the coup faced setbacks. Notably, Badeeb asserts that as early as 1959, Nasir began handpicking specific Yemeni figures, nurturing them as dormant agents who would eventually replace the monarchical framework with a republican one.[41] Echoing this sentiment, Jones posits that the heightened presence of Egyptian advisors and educators in key Yemeni urban centres foreshadowed Egypt's participation in the 1962 coup.[42] Vered supplements this by highlighting that following the dissolution of the Union of Arab

[36]Nasr, Memoirs. . ., vol. 2, 332–34.
[37]Matar, Frankly Speaking . . ., 158.
[38]Sharaf, *Years and Days* . . ., 620.
[39]Sir R. Parkes to Lord Home, telegram No. 1170, October 24, 1962, FO 371/162950, PRO; https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d78
[40]Sir R. Parkes to Lord Home, 1014/62, October 25, 1962. FO 371/162950, PRO.
[41]Saeed Badeeb (1986) *The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over North Yemen, 1962–1970*. Westview Press: Boulder, 34–35.
[42]Clive Jones, *Britain and the Yemen Civil War 1962–1965* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 27–28.

States,[43] Nasir directed his Prime Minister to assemble all necessary tools for toppling the Imamate and instituting regime change in Yemen.[44]

However, accounts from the memoirs of Egyptian officials and military personnel offer a divergent narrative, according to which, the Egyptians had very little, if any, knowledge about Yemen prior to the decision about the intervention. For instance, Hadidi contended that, leading up to the summer of 1962, Cairo displayed minimal interest in Yemen. While Hadidi does acknowledge that Egyptian civil and military authorities were aware of an impending coup in Yemen, he asserts that they were not engaged in its orchestration or execution: 'Sana'a determined the coup's timing, and Egypt played no role in it'.[45] Moreover, Hadidi underscores that, as the Yemen conflict erupted, Egyptian military intelligence was devoid of any Yemen-related knowledge—be it geographical, economic, social, or political.[46]

This perspective is echoed in the memoirs of Salah Nasr, who recalls that a delegation led by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Baydani, future vice president of the Yemen Arab Republic, arrived in Cairo a few days before the coup, apprising Nasir of the impending events. This delegation solicited financial aid, arms shipments, and swift recognition of the emerging republic, requests to which Nasir acceded.[47] However, Nasr emphasizes that Egypt was not intricately involved in the coup's orchestration itself, even asserting that 'Yemen was terra incognita to us'.[48] In concurrence, Sami Sharaf categorically states that 'the Yemeni coup was definitely not an Egyptian creation'.[49]

One of the most glaring indications of Egypt's misinformation regarding Yemen was its failure to grasp the intricate internal dynamics of the country. Nasir's Egypt operated under the assumption that the Yemen population would universally rally behind the Republican forces, viewed as proponents of progressive social and political change, in opposition to the oppressive monarchy. However, Yemen's reality proved to be far more nuanced, marked by deep-seated divisions along tribal, regional, and ideological lines.

Egypt's leadership overlooked the significance of Yemen's religious divide: the southern regions predominantly adhered to Sunni Islam, while the northern territories were primarily inhabited by Zaydi tribes. These Zaydi groups harboured concerns about losing their dominance within a Sunni-dominated regime. Consequently, even tribes not directly affiliated with the royal family threw their support behind the Royalists, fearing marginalization under prospective Sunni rule. Egypt's intervention exacerbated these divisions, prolonging the conflict. Despite this, Egypt's leadership remained oblivious to the historical significance and political influence wielded by the northern highlands and their Zaydi inhabitants in Yemeni politics. Nasir perceived the Yemeni conflict as a localized struggle focused on capturing the capital and other urban centres. Consequently, he believed that a modest task force comprising a few commandos and attack aircraft stationed in the Yemeni capital would be sufficient to consolidate power.[50]

[43]A loosely constructed federal framework between Yemen and the UAR, which was dissolved in December 1961.
[44]Yael Vered (1967) *Revolution and War in Yemen*. Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved (Hebrew), 19.
[45]Hadidi, *Eye Witnes*. . ., 21.
[46]Ibid, 40.
[47]Nasr, *Memoirs*. . ., vol. 2, 331–332.
[48]Nasr, *Memoirs*. . ., vol. 3, 92.
[49]Sharaf and Imam, *'Abd al-Nasir*. . .., 335.
[50]Sharaf, " Years and Days. . ., 620.

In fact, certain members of Egypt's leadership acknowledged their lack of understanding regarding the internal dynamics among Yemeni revolutionaries before the military intervention. Consequently, they advocated for Egypt to refrain from involvement in the conflict. According to Amin Huwaydi, Sadat summoned him to his residence in February 1962 for a meeting with Baydani. During this meeting, the future Vice President of the YAR conveyed that a coup was on the horizon and requested Huwaydi's assistance in persuading Nasir to provide aid. However, Huwaydi declined the request, expressing reservations about Baydani's lack of substantial support within Yemen.[51] Correspondingly, Haykal also reports that Sadat made several endeavours to convince Nasir to assist Baydani, yet these overtures were met with Nasir's disregard. Haykal posits that this dismissal stemmed from the fact that 'Cairo received messages from nearly every Arab nation at that time, each carrying their hopes and dreams that, more often than not, were an illusion, detached from the concrete realities on the ground'.[52]

Despite this perception and his complete lack of familiarity with Yemen, Nasir intensified Egyptian involvement upon realizing that the initial reinforcement of 5,000 soldiers proved inadequate. This decision marked the onset of a vicious cycle. The acute strategic intelligence failures regarding Yemen led the Egyptian leadership to conclude that the military solution lay in deploying more troops. However, as will be elaborated below, each reinforcement resulted in another defeat on the battlefield, triggering further troop deployments, leading to subsequent defeats, thus perpetuating the cycle.

On 22 October 1962, the Egyptian army launched an attack, which aimed to break through Ma'rib, but it faltered in the face of resilient Royalist resistance.[53] The Royalists, seizing the initiative, counterattacked and effectively controlled most of the rural regions in Yemen by early November. Additionally, the Egyptian forces encountered difficulty in infiltrating the eastern part of the country, which remained predominantly under the Royalists' grip.[54] Given the considerable disparity between Egyptian expectations and the reality unfolding on the ground, Ferris's depiction of the initial months of the intervention as a 'series of unmitigated disasters'[55] appears apt.

In response to these setbacks, Egypt opted to intensify its involvement. In November, 'Abd al-Hakim 'Amir arrived in Sana'a for consultations. Following these deliberations, it was agreed to bolster Egyptian forces in Yemen and launch a fresh extensive offensive. Consequently, the Egyptian troop count in Yemen swelled to around 20,000 by the close of November. Subsequently, the Egyptians initiated a widespread offensive in the northern and eastern regions of Yemen. Although they initially achieved some gains, the Royalists swiftly regrouped, recapturing most of the previously lost territory. Moreover, the Royalists took the initiative, launching a counteroffensive that brought their forces within just 30 km of Sana'a by the end of December.[56]

Following a brief pause, the Royalists renewed their campaign in mid-January on multiple fronts, gradually closing the distance between their positions and the capital.

[51]Huwaydi (2002) *50 Years...*, 280–281.
[52]Muhammad Haykal, *Boiling Years (Sanawat al-Ghalayan)*. (Cairo: Al-Ahram Centre, 1988), 727.
[53]BBC, SWB, October 24, 1962, ME/1081/1.
[54]Visits to the Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Middle East: reports by Lt Col Neil McLean, DSO, MP, October 27–30, 1962, AIR 19/1063, PRO.
[55]Ferris, *Nasser's gamble...*, 177.
[56]Vered, *Revolution and War...*, 68–69.

By February, they even disrupted the activities of one of the city's airfields.[57] The Royalists' progress triggered defections among the Republican supporters, with some opting to join the Royalist ranks and others returning to their homes.[58] The fluid dynamics of the conflict exposed fault lines within the Republican forces, highlighting the challenges of maintaining unified support in the face of shifting circumstances and revealing the extent of Egyptian strategic intelligence shortfalls. Consequently, Nasir dispatched additional troops to Yemen, resulting in an influx that raised the number of Egyptian soldiers in Yemen to 25,000 by early February.[59]

This new deployment also sparked a comprehensive Egyptian counter-guerrilla campaign known as 'The Ramadan Offensive', which spanned February and March of 1963.[60] By the end of March, the combined efforts of the Egyptians and their Republican allies had effectively pushed the Royalists further north and east. However, the pendulum of the conflict soon swung again. In a counterattack that unfolded between April and May of 1963, the Royalists managed to reclaim additional territory and even positioned themselves on the outskirts of Sana'a. This resurgence prompted yet another round of Egyptian reinforcement, culminating in a deployment of about 30,000 troops to Yemen by July 1963.[61]

Geopolitical failure

Since its outset, Egyptian officials justified the intervention in Yemen by framing it as an extension of Nasir's broader struggle against conservative and reactionary forces in the Middle East. This framing carried significant implications—Nasir did not anticipate the Saudi reaction to his actions. Initially, Saudi involvement in the conflict remained limited, but Egyptian rhetoric and actions on the ground prompted Riyadh to deepen its engagement by bolstering support for the Royalist forces. This Saudi backing proved pivotal; the Yemen civil war only drew to a close after the kingdom recognized the Republican government in 1970. Therefore, while Egypt's intelligence failure at the strategic level can be attributed to insufficient information gathering, the geopolitical setback stemmed primarily from a miscalculation in analysing and anticipating the response of regional rivals to the events unfolding in Yemen.

On multiple occasions, Nasir explicitly stated that the motivation behind intervening in Yemen was to counteract any potential Saudi influence within the region. During a speech delivered on 23 December 1962, Nasir asserted, 'Should we stand idly by as reactionism wreaks havoc on the Yemeni revolution? If we do, won't reactionism inevitably turn its attention towards us, launching an assault against socialism, progress, and the people of Cairo? We must shield our principles from the reactionaries at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula'.[62] In another address in the same month, the Egyptian president emphasized,

[57]Sir R. Parkes to Foreign Office, telegram No. 168, Febuary 8, 1963, FO 371/168790. PRO.
[58]Field communique from the Royalist Yemen, Royal Yemeni Legation, London. February 8, 1963. FO 371/168790, PRO.
[59]Ibid, 82.
[60]Ahmad Yusuf *Egypt's Role in Yemen (1962–1967) (aldor almisri fil Yemen)*. (Cairo: alHay'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah li-l-Kitab, 1981), 206 (Arabic).
[61]Memorandum for the Record, Central Intelligence Agency, Job 80 B 01285A, Box 7, DCI Files, DCI (McCone) Memos for the Record, Meetings with the President. December 27, 1963 https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d394
[62]Nasir Speeches 1961–1966, part 4, 477 (Arabic).

'Those who exert their influence over the palaces of reaction in Riyadh and Amman are now attempting to restore the palace of reaction in Cairo… Thus, on your behalf, I extend congratulations to our courageous compatriots who lead the most honourable campaign in Yemen… This campaign has evolved into a comprehensive confrontation between the Arab nation and all those deemed adversaries of the Arab cause'.[63]

Muhammad Haykal also echoed this narrative. For example, he conveyed to the US ambassador in Egypt on 10 October 1962, that given Saudi Arabia's and to a lesser extent Jordan's military involvement in Yemen, Egypt could not permit the new Yemeni regime 'to be driven to a wall'.[64] Haykal reiterated this stance during a conversation with Harold Beeley, the British ambassador in Cairo. He expounded that initially, Nasir regarded the Yemeni coup as an internal Yemeni affair. However, this perception evolved as it became evident that other Arab nations were embroiled in the conflict.[65]

Saudi Arabia has contributed to this narrative through its assistance to the Royalists in the initial stages of the conflict. On 3 October 1962, two Saudi pilots defected to Egypt, bringing with them an aircraft laden with weaponry intended for the Imam's forces. Subsequently, similar aircraft from Saudi Arabia landed in Egypt on October 4 and 8. On October 18, al-Salal showcased 500,000 Saudi Riyals to foreign journalists in Sana'a, claiming that these funds had been dispatched from Saudi Arabia to support the Royalist tribes in the north.[66] On November 16, Haykal, in an article for *al-Ahram*, expounded, 'The raison d'être of the UAR's presence in Yemen is to safeguard its borders against ongoing attempts at foreign invasion… The decision to extend military assistance was made only upon the revelation of the Saudi aeroplanes'.[67]

However, this framing carries a significant constraint—Saudi Arabia's decision to decisively support the Royalist faction was a *reaction* to Egypt's determination to escalate its involvement, as affirmed by Salah Nasr in his memoirs: 'Saudi intelligence intercepted the movement of Egyptian forces, leading Faisal to dispatch personnel, weapons, and financial resources to strengthen the Imam's supporters'.[68] Robert Komer of the US Security Council argued that in October 1962, Saudi Arabia refrained from providing substantial aid to the Yemeni Royalists, while Nasir was dispatching sizable forces and substantial equipment.[69] Moreover, during a British Cabinet meeting in January 1963, it was noted that Saudi Arabia and Jordan 'were still sending in a certain number of small arms to the Royalists'.[70] The Saudi engagement in Yemen also preceded multiple appeals from Riyadh to the Kennedy administration, urging them to curb Nasir's activities in Yemen.[71] Consequently, Orkaby argued that 'When

[63]Nasir Speeches, February 1962- June 1964, p. 260–261 (Arabic).
[64]Telegram From the Embassy in the United Arab Republic to the Department of State, Department of State, Central Files, 786 h.00/10–1062. October 10, 1962 https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d77
[65]Sir H. Beeley to Foreign Office, telegram No. 745, October 11, 1962, FO 371/162948, PRO.
[66]*Al-Akhbar*, October 4, 1962 (Arabic).
[67]*Al-Ahram*, November 16, 1962 (Arabic).
[68]Nasr, *Memoirs…*, vol. 2, 333.
[69]Memorandum for the Record, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Yemen, Bunker Miscellaneous. March 11, 1963. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d189
[70]Record of a meeting at Admiralty House, January 8, 1963. PREM 11/4356, PRO.
[71]Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to President Kennedy. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Saudi Arabia, 10/62, October 4, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d68; Memorandum of Conversation, President's Talk with Crown Prince Faysal, Department of State, Central Files, 786A.11/10–562. October 5, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d71

Nasser issued a declaration of military support on October 3 there was no foreign presence in Yemen'.[72]

Its non-accuracy notwithstanding, the Egyptian framing holds importance in deciphering the mindset of the Egyptian leadership, offering insights into why Nasir chose to elevate the initial limited involvement in Yemen to a substantial deployment of thousands of troops. The growing presence of Egyptian troops in Yemen introduced an offensive dimension to the Arab Cold War narrative. Concurrent with the escalation of involvement in Yemen, Egypt embarked on incursions within Saudi territory. For instance, in early November, Egyptian aircraft conducted airstrikes on Yemeni Royalists' camps in the Najran Province, situated near the Saudi-Yemeni border. Additionally, Saudi villages such as Muwassam in the Jizan Province, southwest Saudi Arabia, were targeted in these attacks. Such incursions on Saudi soil persisted throughout the latter half of 1962 and the first six months of 1963.[73]

These attacks brought renewed focus to the ideological underpinnings of the Nasirist regime. According to these principles, Egypt, as a revolutionary/revisionist state, was obligated to seize any opportunity to weaken and confront the so-called conservative camp. Nasir discussed his intentions in internal discussions with senior Egyptian officials following the dissolution of the UAR, stating that the next campaign would target 'the reactionaries, especially Saud and Husayn, and it would be an ideological campaign'.[74] Hence, according to this framing, Nasir aimed to exploit any regional conflict, particularly the Yemen civil war, as a means to launch an 'anti-reactionary' ideological crusade.

Nasir and other Egyptian officials did not conceal their ambitions to leverage the Yemeni civil war to transform Yemen into a platform for disseminating anti-Saudi activities, with the ultimate goal of undermining and toppling the House of Saud. In an op-ed in *the Bulletin* in November 1962, the Egyptian President argued: 'If further action is necessary, Egyptian forces can reach Jeddah, the seaport of Saudi Arabia, in 24 hours . . . we could provoke trouble all over Saudi Arabia . . . around Jeddah, in the Eastern Province, and in the North'.[75] Furthermore, Hadidi contended that 'Egypt undoubtedly aimed to stabilize the situation in Yemen and then progress to the next, more critical stage—establishing a military presence on the Yemen-Saudi Arabia border. This presence likely formed the foundation for Operation 9000 (the codename for the intervention) and its ultimate goal; it may even have been its primary motivation'.[76] Sadat, in his autobiography, further expounded that during the summer of 1962, Saudi Arabia and other conservative states had deliberated methods to assail and isolate Egypt, thus positioning the Yemeni civil war as 'a suitable occasion to impart a lesson to King Saud, who sponsored the disintegration with Syria and spearheaded the campaign against Egypt'.[77] Sami Sharaf took the scope beyond Saudi Arabia's borders, proposing the extension of the Yemeni revolution to liberate all the Gulf emirates.[78]

As mentioned earlier, Egyptian discourse and actions against Saudi Arabia had a significant outcome—they heightened Saudi Arabia's threat perception regarding the

[72]Asher Orkaby, *Beyond the Arab Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 34.
[73]Safran, *Saudi Arabia. . .*, 96; Gregory Gause III, *Saudi-Yemeni Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 60.
[74]Al-Baghdadi, *Memoirs. . .*, Vol. 2, 156.
[75]Badeeb *The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict. . .*, 18.
[76]Hadidi, *Eye Witeness. . .*, 44.
[77]Sadat, *In Search. . .*, 162–163.
[78]Sharaf and Imam, *'Abd al-Nasir. . .*, 338.

Egyptian intervention. Apparently, no one in Cairo grasped the intensity of Saudi threat perception regarding the Egyptian intervention in Yemen. Consequently, the Nasir regime failed to anticipate the Saudi response and to comprehend its impact on the battlefield in Yemen.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had always viewed Yemen as its 'backyard', evoking concerns about the potential for revolutionary change within its borders. Thus, the Egyptian intervention in Yemen was construed by the Saudis as a formidable menace, fearing the transformation of Yemen into a platform for disseminating hostile ideologies and irredentist aspirations. Specifically, Riyadh harboured the belief that a sustained Egyptian presence in Yemen might embolden dissident elements within Saudi Arabia to emulate the Yemeni model—instigating uprisings against the royal family and calling for Egyptian military support.[79] This apprehension worsened in October 1962, when al-Salal openly expressed his intent to establish a 'Republic of the Arabian Peninsula', which entailed toppling existing monarchies, principalities, and emirates in the Gulf and replacing them with an Egyptian-style republican administration under his leadership. His vice president, Baydani, took an even more explicit stance, proclaiming on October 11 that 'Yemen regards itself as being at war with Saudi Arabia'.[80]

In response to Egypt's intervention in Yemen, Saudi Arabia bolstered its support for the Yemeni Royalists. In 1963, Saudi Arabia allocated $15 million for arms supplies and offered training to the Royalist forces. Furthermore, the Saudi government enlisted the services of European mercenaries to strengthen the ranks of the Royalists. Additionally, Saudi Arabia garnered the backing of two other conservative Muslim states—Pakistan and Iran—which extended material and military assistance to the Royalists. Reports even suggested the presence of Iranian advisors on the ground in Yemen, further accentuating external support for the Royalist cause.[81] In fact, in April 1966, the Iranian ambassador in London shared doubts with his Israeli counterpart about the Royalists' viability without Iranian support.[82] Through these efforts, Saudi Arabia successfully fortified the unity of the conservative camp in the Middle East. Subsequent to their collaboration in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran deepened, leading Sharaf to characterize Iran's cooperation with Saudi Arabia as a 'Sunni-Shiite reconciliation aimed at restoring the Zaydi throne in Yemen'.[83]

Furthermore—Egypt's increasing involvement in Yemen pushed Nasir's historic foe—the United Kingdom—into the scene. The British, who dominated the port city of Aden and its surrounding at that time, perceived a Republican-Nasirist victory in Yemen as a threat to the Federation of South Arabia (FSA)—a conglomerate of 15 tribes, formed in April 1962, and the Protectorate of South Arabia (founded January 1963), which included tribes from the former East Aden Protectorate that did not join the FSA.[84] This perception was not unfounded, as the YAR adopted a belligerent attitude towards its southern neighbours from the outset. Already on 22 October 1962, a Republican aircraft bombed a building in Beihan, one of the FSA's

[79]Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 94.
[80]Manfred W. Wenner, *Modern Yemen, 1918–1966* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 196–197.
[81]Yusuf, *Egypt's Role* . . . , 269.
[82]Asher Goren to Dov Yanon, April 20, 1966. ISA-MFA-Political-0013v4l (Hebrew).
[83]Sharaf, *Years and Days*., 629.
[84]Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs (Talbot) to Secretary of State Rusk, Department of State, Central Files, 785.00/11–1362. November 13, 1962. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v18/d97

emirates, killing one child.[85] In addition, Muhammad al-Naaman, YAR Minister of Local Government, said on 18 October 1962, that the UK is 'Yemen's no. 1 enemy'.[86] Al-Salal also delivered a speech on Sana'a Radio on 9 November 1962, on which he called on 'our brothers in the south to act as their brothers in the north and to be ready to take part in the revolution'.[87]

These events led to the creation of a coalition for involvement in Yemen among some members of the British military-political elite, who came to be known as 'The Aden Group'. This group included British Minister for Aviation, Julian Amery, retired Colonel and Conservative Member of Parliament Neil McLean, Secretary of State for the Colonies Duncan Sandys, Defence Secretary Peter Thorneycroft, and former Commander of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman's Armed Forces, Colonel David Smiley. McLean, who made a seven-week tour in the Middle East in March-April 1963, even argued that Saudi Crown Prince Faysal pleaded with him to encourage the British government to oppose Egyptian intervention in Yemen by force.[88]

At first, this group's capacity to support the Royalist's war effort was considerably restricted at the time due to the lack of cooperation from the British government. However, the course of events in 1963 increased London's attention to Yemen. In March 1963, the Yemeni government transferred arms to tribes on the border with the FSA, with the active assistance of the Egyptian army. The British, in response, carried out several attacks and raids against targets in Yemen, mostly in the Harib region, during the summer of 1963.[89] But these attacks failed to establish stable deterrence vis-à-vis the Egyptians and their Republicans protégés. In the fall of 1963, the British discovered that Sana'a was supplying weapons and a training facility to the National Liberation Front (NLF), an Egyptian-backed guerrilla movement operating in southern Yemen that aimed to oust British rule. On 10 December 1963, the NLF even carried out a failed assassination attempt on the new High Commissioner for the FSA, Sir Kennedy Trevaskis, at Aden airport.[90]

Consequently, the British government undertook preparations for more extensive covert operations in Yemen, with a primary focus on arming the Royalists. Additionally, private British companies facilitated the sale of weapons to the Royalists, often leveraging Saudi Arabia's involvement in the process. In tandem with these efforts, influential figures like Amery and McLean reached out to David Stirling, the founder of the Special Air Service (SAS), the elite unit of the British army, seeking his assistance for the British endeavours in Yemen. Starting from April 1963, Stirling, alongside some of his former comrades, collaborated closely with the Royalists in Yemen, primarily serving as military advisors to Imam Badr.[91]

The British engagement in Yemen had another significant consequence—it drew yet another of Nasir's adversaries, Israel, into the conflict. In fact, connections between Israel and the Royalists had already been established. As early as December 1963, a French diplomat

[85]Telegram No. 905 and 908 from Aden, October 22, 1962, CO 1055/256, PRO.
[86]*Al-Akhbar*, October 18, 1962 (Arabic).
[87]BBC, SWB, November 9, ME/1097/1.
[88]Visits to the Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Middle East: reports by Lt Col Neil McLean, DSO, MP. March 1-April 18, 1963, AIR 19/1063, PRO.
[89]Sir Patrick Dean to Lord Home, telegram no. 228, August 31, 1963. PREM 11/4928, PRO.
[90]Clive Jones (2004) *Britain and the Yemen Civil War 1962–1965*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 100–101; Draft research paper on Yemen conflict 1962–1965, 1966, FO 370/2858, PRO.
[91]IWMA (Imperial War Museum Archives), Boyle and Johnson Papers, 'British Field Liaison Force, Yemen, 1960s'; Duff Hart-Davis *The War that Never Was* (London: Century, 2011), 10–15; David Smiley, *Arabian Assignment*. (London: Leo Cooper, 1975), 115.

conveyed Imam Badr's gratitude to the Israeli ambassador in Paris for Israel's unwavering stance against Nasir.[92] Furthermore, in February 1964, Shaul Bar Haim from the Israeli Embassy in Washington met with a member of the Yemeni royal family, providing assistance prior to the latter's meeting with members of the American State Department.[93]

The UK capitalized on these Israeli-Yemeni connections to further their objectives. With the challenge of transporting supplies by land to the mountainous regions of northern Yemen becoming nearly insurmountable, the British turned to airborne deliveries. However, using the Royal Air Force for this purpose was politically precarious for London. Hence, after gaining the Imam's approval, the British approached Israel, which had a vested interest in prolonging Nasir's entanglement in the Yemeni conflict. On 31 March 1964, an Israeli aircraft transported weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies to the Royalists. The Israeli Air Force conducted an additional 13 such missions until 1966, codenamed Operations 'Gravy' and 'Porcupine'.[94]

Thus, the manner in which Nasir framed the intervention in Yemen, along with the actions of the Egyptian army on the ground, transformed the conflict from a local issue into what Haykal later described as 'a protracted and brutal conflict between two systems'.[95] In other words, Egypt's misunderstanding of the geopolitical implications of its intervention in Yemen led to a miscalculation of the Saudi and British threat perceptions. This misjudgement exacerbated tensions in the region, fuelled Saudi and British interventions, drew more 'conservative' states into the conflict, and ultimately prolonged the Yemeni conflict.

Moreover—The 'Arab Cold War' perspective imposed a path dependency on Nasir. By framing the Yemeni intervention as part of his broader conflict with Saudi Arabia and the conservative camp, he turned it into a struggle for his regime's identity—a struggle he could not afford to lose, particularly after a series of setbacks in this realm in previous years. As Saudi and British support for the Royalists intensified, Nasir felt compelled to escalate in response. Additionally, Nasir's limited understanding of Saudi threat perceptions surrounding Egypt's involvement in the Arabian Peninsula, along with his misreading of the internal dynamics within the Republican camp, contributed to the failure of the agreement reached after his discussions with King Faisal in the summer of 1965 (the 'Jeddah Agreement').[96]

Hence, the number of Egyptian troops in Yemen grew to 40,000 in April 1964,[97] and to over 50,000 in December 1964.[98] The peak of the Egyptian intervention in Yemen arrived at the end of 1965 when around 70,000 Egyptians were stationed there.[99] For Nasir, escalating involvement in Yemen was a necessary move, despite coinciding with the intensifying confrontation with Israel that culminated in the 1967

[92]Shaul Bar Haim to Yaakov Herzog, Gabriel Padan to Yael Vared, December 16, 1963. ISA-mfa-Political-000kapq.
[93]Shaul Bar Haim to Yaakov Herzog, Yemen 103.1, February 26, 1964. ISA-mfa-NorthAmerica1-000ooua.
[94]Yogev Elbaz 'Beyond the Periphery—Israel's Intervention in the Yemen Civil War in the 1960s', *Israel studies* 27, no. 1, (2022): 93–95.
[95]Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, 'Egyptian Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs* 56, no. 4, (1978): 722.
[96]https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v21/d380 ; Ferris, 245–249.
[97]Memorandum From Robert W. Komer of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, United Kingdom, Meetings with Butler, 4/64. April 28, 1964.
[98]Memorandum of Conversation, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 59, Central Files 1964–66, POL 27 YEMEN. December 11, 1964. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v21/d356
[99]al-Hadidi (1984) *Eye Witness*. . ., 133.

war. Nasir's assertiveness in both Yemen and against Israel reflected two sides of the same coin—an attempt to 'compensate' for his setbacks within the inter-Arab arena, which had tarnished his image as the leader of the pan-Arab movement. Anti-Israeli sentiment ran deep in the Arab world, and leaders, especially Nasir, used such rhetoric to boost their legitimacy and popularity. Yet from the mid-1960s, Nasir's posture towards Israel became noticeably more confrontational. He abandoned his post-Suez stance of 'no war, no peace'—a position that signalled hostility without direct confrontation—and adopted a more aggressive approach, evident in actions like the closure of the Tiran Straits to Israeli shipping.[100]

Thus, while Nasir viewed the escalation of Egypt's involvement in Yemen as a rational decision, it was based on flawed intelligence at the tactical, strategic, and geopolitical levels. Consequently, even the substantial deployment of Egyptian forces failed to secure a resolution, leading Egypt deeper into the Yemeni quagmire with significant repercussions for its economy and the standing of its military.

Conclusion

Egypt's intervention in the Yemeni civil war serves as a compelling example of the critical role of intelligence failures in shaping military and geopolitical outcomes. The abundance of memoirs from various echelons of the Nasir administration, including senior intelligence officials, provides valuable insights into the decision-making processes of one of the most prominent Arab states of that era. The literature highlights a stark reality: before Egypt intervened in Yemen, it lacked even the most fundamental information about the country.

Indeed, Egypt held the belief that its surplus military strength would suffice to secure victory in the campaign. The magnitude of the intelligence failure was such that even deploying one-third of the Egyptian army's manpower proved insufficient to overcome the military prowess of the Royalists. As the Egyptian literature reveals, there were significant gaps at multiple levels, underscoring the depth of the intelligence failures that plagued the intervention.

Egypt's involvement in Yemen also warrants scrutiny within the broader context of Nasir's ideological ambitions and the geopolitical dynamics of the time. Nasir's failure to anticipate how framing the intervention as a battle against the perceived 'reactionary camp' would be perceived by regional adversaries, is telling. Insights gleaned from Egyptian sources indicate that what initially served as a primary motivation for the intervention eventually became a significant factor contributing to its failure. Moreover, the involvement of external actors such as the UK, Iran, Pakistan, and Israel, added further layers of complexity to the conflict. Furthermore, Nasir's portrayal of the conflict as part of a larger ideological struggle against reactionary forces locked him into a path dependency, wherein continued escalation became almost inevitable. Each Royalist victory and Saudi reinforcement triggered further Egyptian troop deployments, perpetuating a cycle of escalation without a discernible path to victory.

[100]Panayiotis Jerasimof Vatikiotis, *Nasser and His Generation*. (New York: Croom Helm, 1978), 254–255.

Egypt's intervention in Yemen vividly demonstrates how intelligence failures can profoundly impact strategic decision-making and trigger a chain of geopolitical miscalculations. It stands as a stark reminder of the dangers inherent in overreliance on military prowess, overshadowing the imperative for thorough information gathering about local conditions and a deep understanding of regional dynamics. Accurate intelligence, complemented by a nuanced comprehension of local socio-political landscapes and a pragmatic approach to geopolitical strategy, emerges as indispensable tools to avoid the pitfalls of strategic misjudgements that can escalate into prolonged and costly conflicts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).